

ART. XIX.—*Coniston Hall*. By W. G. COLLINGWOOD,  
M.A., F.S.A.

*Read at the Site, September 10th, 1909.*

THE family of the Flemings, who built and still own this ancient manor-house, came to Coniston about 1250. Of their earlier dwelling here nothing can be said, except that there is no reason to suppose it stood elsewhere than on, or near, the present site. That it should be so close to the lake is curious, for all the other ancient homesteads of Coniston are above the low ground, along the brink of the fell. The group of houses near the church—itsself not earlier than the end of the sixteenth century—is comparatively modern. In mediæval days the flats between the bridge and the lake, being undrained, were no doubt swampy; and it might have been thought that this site was too low and aguish to be the choice of those who had the pick of the place. But, though low, it is off the flats and on the edge of rocky ground. It also commands the only good harbour for sheltering boats from the prevailing winds. This gives a hint of the reason for the choice. Defence was no object; there was never need for it here; no war nor even Scots raids are recorded to have touched Coniston. The modern desire for a view and pretty surroundings was not felt in the middle ages. But business was always business. In 1240—ten years or so before the Flemings came—the baron of Kendal had allowed the Furness monks to put two boats on the lake, one for fishing and one for *mæremium*—i.e., carrying timber, &c. If the monks were engaged in this traffic, others were so engaged, and the waterway was of some importance. Timber, charcoal, and woodwork (the coopers and basketmakers of the valley were busy before

the Reformation) must have already begun to be boated down the water, and it may be suggested that it was worth the Flemings' while to control the traffic by building their house at the harbour.

In the field a few yards north of the west wing of the hall there are foundations of an oblong rectangular building, 50 by 18 feet internal measurement, with walls which—from the heaps of grassy ruin—appear to have been very solid. The eastern and northern banks are 20 feet broad; that on the west, of which the interior edge can be seen, measures 13 feet across the south end and 16 feet on the north. It is perhaps hazardous to suggest that this represents the dwellinghouse of the earlier Flemings, possibly turned into a barn when the new hall was built, and so not entirely obliterated. But it may be noted that from about 1485 to about 1532 Coniston Hall was used as a dower house, the squire living at Rydal; and this suggests that the hall here was then not so large as the roomy mansion of which we have the remains.

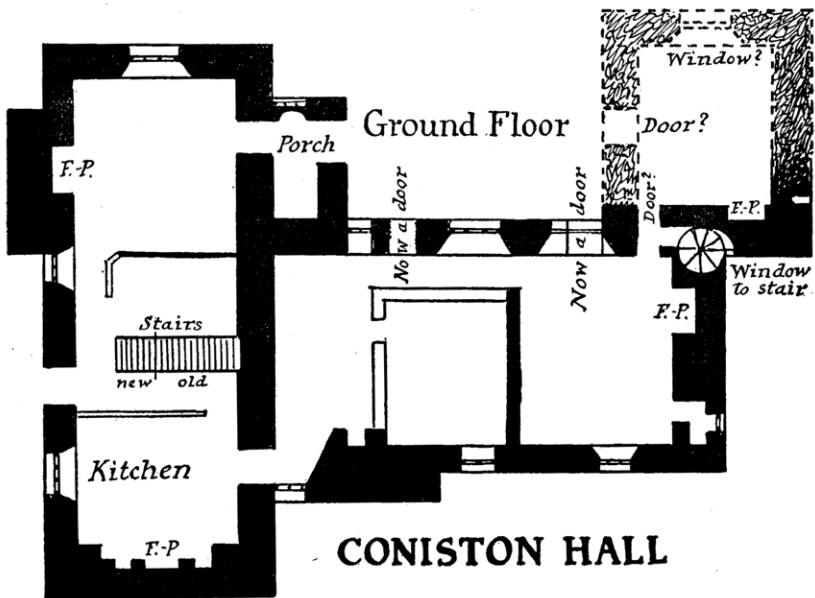
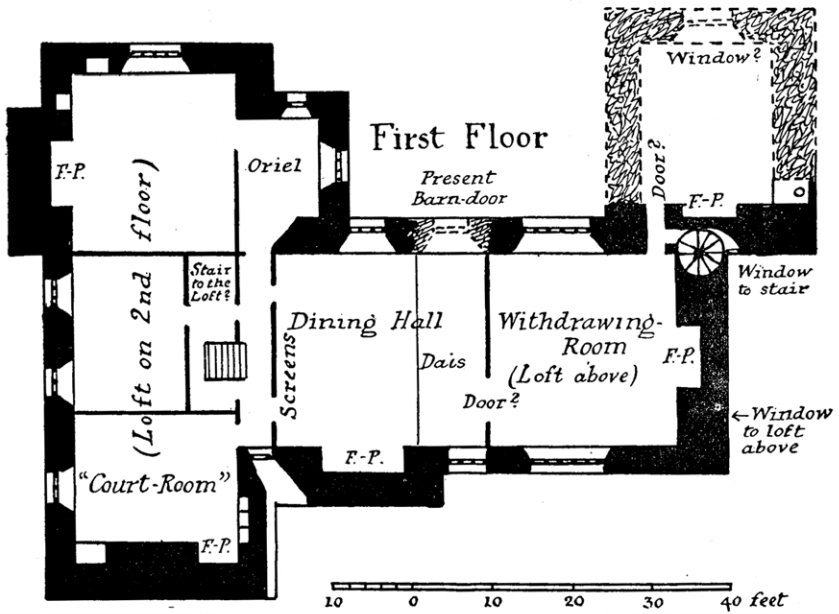
It was Squire William Fleming who built the church in 1586, and is said by Father West to have "enlarged and repaired" the hall. But a hundred years earlier there was a Fleming who seems to have had the means to build, namely, Sir Thomas. He married Isabel de Lancaster, the heiress who brought Rydal to the family, and he died about 1481, after living (as many of his successors did) partly at Coniston and partly at Rydal. It has been supposed that he built this hall, or the nucleus of it which William is said to have enlarged and repaired. Mr. H. S. Cowper (these *Transactions*, o.s., ix., art. 32, on "Coniston Hall") considered that the whole building was fifteenth century, though he added that it was possible the hall was of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, re-edified in the fifteenth. But one point has been suggested by a recent examination—that the whole building is of one piece. It is not, like so many others, built round a pele, nor even enlarged from a small house by additions. The

earlier home of the Flemings appears to have been entirely reconstructed at some time, and we must enquire whether this reconstruction took place in the fifteenth or in the sixteenth century.

The plans opposite are based on small drawings by Mr. John Bell for Mr. Cowper's article above mentioned, with some re-measurements. The inclined way to the barn, as now seen, is omitted. The north is approximately to the top of the page.

The east wing looks at first sight like a pele tower. The present north-east wall is a rough modern buttress to support the cracked ruin, but the original walls measure 64 inches in thickness on the east, 65 inches on the north, and though the exact dimensions on the west cannot be obtained, the breadth there seems to have been quite as great. In the south wall there is a spiral staircase which lies partly in the wall leaving this one at right angles, and forming the end of the central block of building. The staircase must have been designed and built simultaneously with both walls and both blocks. The east wing is therefore neither earlier nor later than the central hall, though it may possibly have been given its rather curious plan in order to look like a pele, for imitations of peles were in fashion in the sixteenth century.

The west wing has, on the ground plan, the appearance of a possible addition owing to the thick wall which divides it from the central building up to the first floor; but its masonry is in the same style as that of the central block. On the west front are three retaining arches above the door and windows, exactly like those in the wall of the north front, forming the central dining hall, and of the lean-to forming the entrance porch adjacent to the central block. This lean-to, therefore, is not an addition; and its upper room has moulded joists, suggesting that it was built at the time when the rest of the moulded woodwork in the interior was put up. It resembles in ground plan the similar entrance porch at Wharton Hall (these







CONISTON HALL ; WINDOWS OF THE SPIRAL STAIR.

*Photo. by R. G. Collingwood.*

TO FACE P. 359.

*Transactions*, N.S., ii., p. 257). The general plan, however, of Coniston Hall more nearly resembles that of Hawkshead Hall (these *Transactions*, O.S., xi., p. 25). In both there was a central dining room with a kitchen wing on the west, divided from it by a thick wall, and a withdrawing-room on the east, to the corner of which was added an incomplete east wing connected with the central block by a spiral stair. But there are no traceried windows or carved stones to give a date to portions, as at Hawkshead, earlier than the sixteenth century. In one respect Coniston Hall resembles Burneside Hall, namely in having the dining and withdrawing rooms upstairs; though, again, there are none of the indications of a mediæval fortress as seen at Burneside. The use of the first floor here is obviously to keep the best rooms off the damp ground and above the lake mist.

In trying to see the house as it was, we must remove the inclined plane which now forms the cartway up to the barn door, once a window to the dining hall, a room of 26 by 23 feet. Immediately inside the barn door is the dais, of which the edge-beam is original. Behind the dais in the roof-beams are mortice holes and four remaining planks of the timber partition terminating the dining hall to the east, and screening off the withdrawing room. This was lighted by large windows, and warmed by a large fireplace. In the north-east corner the spiral stair already mentioned led down with solid oak steps and two windows to a room below (not into the garden, though the access is now only from outside through the lower window). The door from the stair into the room below the withdrawing room is visible, though blocked; the door from the stair to the north-east room appears to be marked by a break in the masonry; but the exact arrangement of the other doors to the spiral stair cannot be seen as the building now stands. This lower room had a good fireplace and two windows; it was therefore not a cellar, but a stone parlour. In the south-east corner is a small

closet in the wall, with a window; no drain is visible outside, below the level of the floor, and therefore it was perhaps not a garderobe but a store closet or wine cellar.

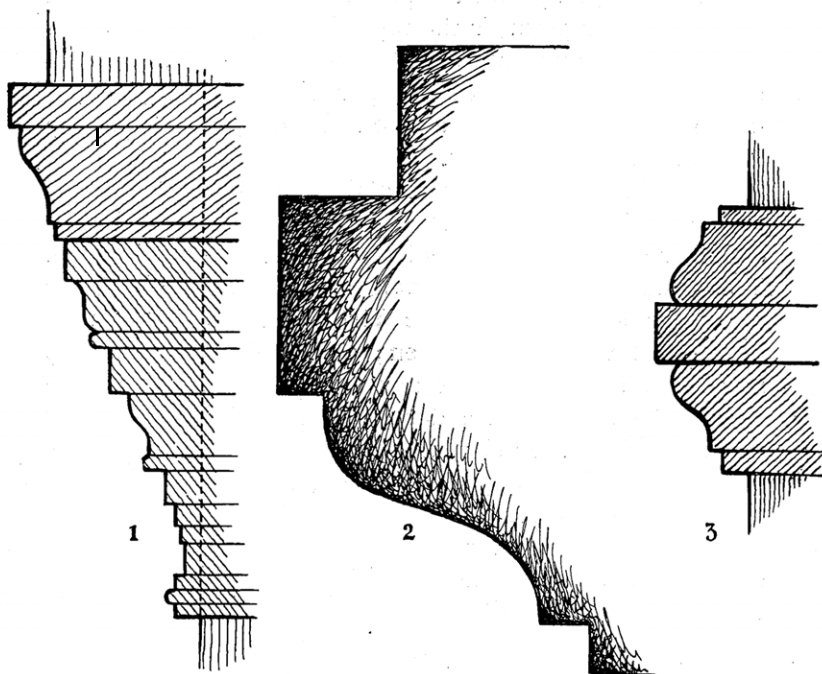
From the withdrawing room the spiral stair seems to have led up to a loft, of which the ends of the flooring-joists can be seen in the walls. It was lighted by a small window looking eastward. Mr. Cowper called this the solar; but being a loft entirely in the roof, and without a fireplace, it is hardly good enough for the best bedroom, which we may find in the upper floor of the ruined east wing adjoining, with its big fireplace and garderobe. At Kirkby Hall (Cross House) a similar room in the roof over the withdrawing room was the chapel (which Mr. Cowper has described in these *Transactions*, o.s., xiii., p. 287).

Returning to the dining room and standing on the dais, we face the screens (as in a college hall) with the great fireplace on the left hand, 10 feet 6 inches broad and 7 feet high to the top of the red freestone arch. Above it is a retaining arch like those already mentioned, and a gable in the roof, now crossed by an additional roof-beam, which also crosses the window opposite. The other beams, fine pieces of timber, appear to be original, though the roof is modern; for during the eighteenth century the whole place was uninhabited and fell into ruin. Much carved oak has been carried away, but we can see the workmanship of the screens. They had three horizontal rows of square panels, the upper two framed in mouldings  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches broad, and rather elaborately and prettily carved with the chisel. The mouldings (Fig. 1) are in two pieces, and the outer piece, forming a frame of 2 inches wide, is identical with the ornament of the lower row of panels, which have no inner mouldings. The two doors are blocked; they had Tudor arches, and were no doubt like the door still left in the passage behind the screens. The mouldings of the panels of this door are given in Fig. 3.

The screens passage had a window on the south, bringing



the light by a deep splay through the thick wall. A ceiling now covers the passage, sloped to take the lower light from the splay window. If there was ever a minstrel gallery it was probably only over the north half of the passage; otherwise the stairhead would be in darkness; but there seems to be nothing to prove the gallery. North of a door which once divided the passage, the present



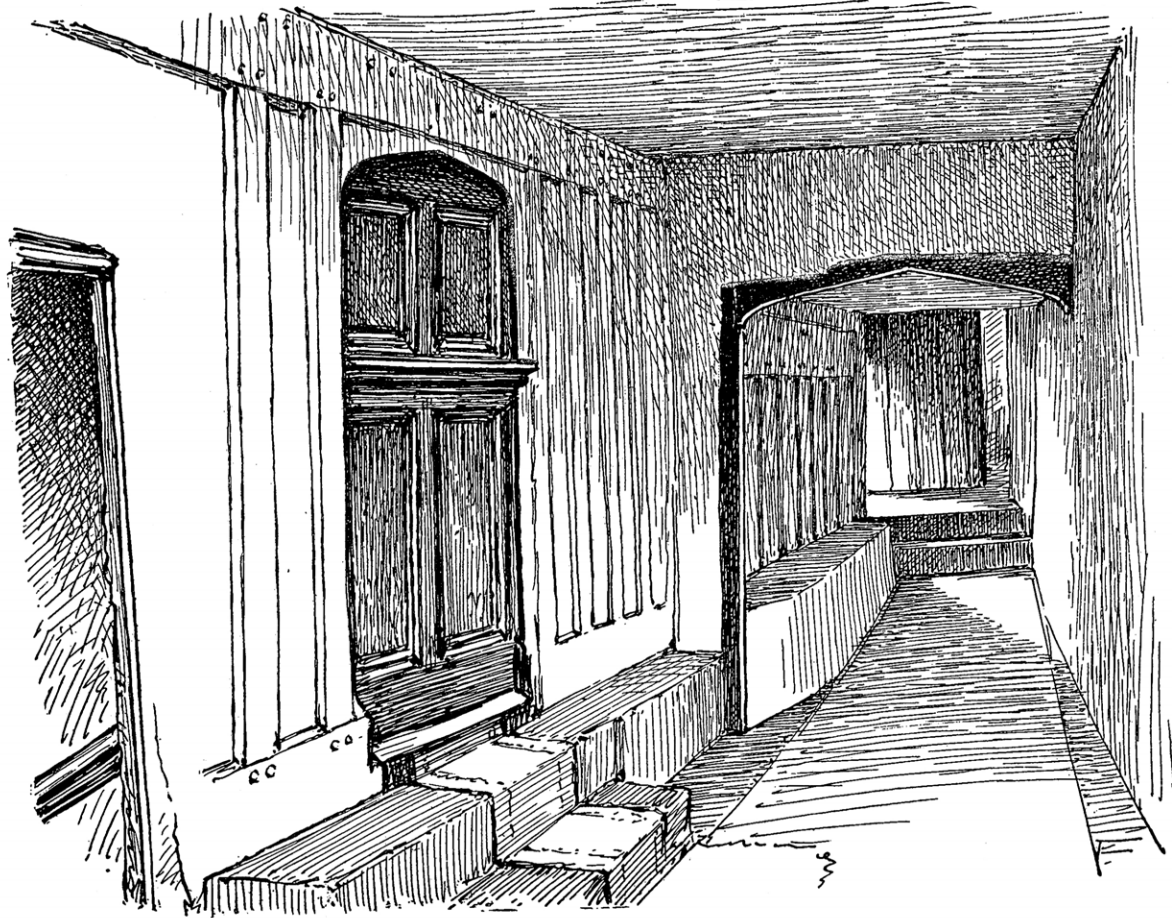
MOULDINGS IN WOODWORK AT CONISTON HALL ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ).

ceiling is lower; but at that point we are beyond the screens and above the porch in the lean-to, or oriel as Mr. Cowper called it (*loc. cit.*). He thought it "a waiting room outside the hall . . . perhaps used as a chapel." It was a small room with moulded joists and oak-mullioned, low windows on two sides, but without a fireplace. From it, up a couple of steps, a large bedroom was entered.

This chamber had a wide fireplace and beside it a recess or closet, and a big window looking north. With the adjoining room it formed such a suite as might have served for guest chambers, being shut off from the rest of the house by the door in the screens passage. The mouldings of the jamb of this door are given in Fig. 2, and its Tudor arch has been restored in the sketch of the screens passage opposite. The ledge to the left, which looks like a long seat, is the top of the thick wall which divides the ground floor of the west wing from the central building. The original oaken partitions with their tree-nails are seen above it; and on the extreme left is the head of the kitchen stairs.

The closed door, leading out of the screens passage, opens upon a dark landing above the stair, and thence into a chamber with two windows looking west, and no fireplace. This is now cut into two rooms, but the original timber partitions between it and the north and south chambers of the west wing can be seen; and the doorway to the right hand as one enters is apparently original. To the right of this door, in a dark corner, stairs or a ladder probably led to the loft running the whole length of this wing. It is lighted by a window at the north end, and the little window over the screens probably served for a borrowed light and air to the loft (where perhaps the servants slept, as was the custom in old homesteads) rather than as an opportunity for the master of the house to overlook the dining hall. There may have been the usual spy-hole in the loft over the withdrawing room, which has been suggested as the chapel.

The screens passage led, finally, at its south end to another good chamber, at one time called the court-room. It is lit from the west, and has the fireplace in the corner. A curious fixed seat is in a recess, beside and facing the fire. On the other side of the fire was a closet or recess in the wall, now, like that in the north chamber, blocked up.



CONISTON HALL: the Screens Passage, looking from the head of the Kitchen Stairs towards the Oriel.



The stairs going down behind the screens from the dining room to the ground floor are formed of solid blocks of oak, like the steps of the spiral staircase, except half-a-dozen of the lower steps, which were probably decayed during the period of ruin, and then were replaced. At the stairfoot on the left hand is the kitchen, with a fireplace 12 feet 8 inches in breadth. On the right hand there was a large room; it has a fireplace, and windows looking west and north, and another door leading to the porch in the lean-to. This porch has a curious little semicircular recess between the inner and the outer door, and the outer door was wider than at present, and formed the main entrance into the house.

To all the fireplaces there are the same tall "Flemish" chimneys, bulky cylinders superimposed on squares, which before they were newly cemented were picturesque ruinous features, and still give the house some character. Such chimneys are seen also at the old halls of Hawkshead, Kirkby, Nether Levens, Kendal—to name a few of many examples in North Lancashire and Westmorland. As they were in use throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they help little in the dating, except as a warning against placing the year too early.

The windows have wooden frames and mullions, some of them being the original oak. The fireplaces are arched and jambed in red freestone, but no distinctive carving is visible. The woodwork of the screens and doors has Elizabethan mouldings, and the moulding of the joists in the "oriel" seems to connect the building of that part with the interior fittings, as the retaining arch in the masonry of that part connects it with the north and west fronts. The whole house seems to be in one piece, no part earlier than another. The plan is analogous to neighbouring halls of the sixteenth century, with no signs of earlier work.

The conclusion suggested is that Coniston Hall is the building of Squire William Fleming, that "gentleman of

great pomp and expence, by which," as West says, "he injured an opulent fortune." West saw his initials and a date on carving in the hall, which is lost and the date is not recorded; but it must have been between about 1574 when he married his second wife Agnes, sister of Sir Robert Bindloss of Borwick (for no doubt she brought him the money he spent), and his death about 1598.

The story of the family need not be attempted here.\* More ample material than is usually found for local history is available for the Flemings in the Rydal Hall documents, of which abstracts have been given in a volume of the Historical MSS. Commission, and their doings under Cromwell and Charles II. are detailed with great fulness by Dr. Magrath in "The Flemings at Oxford." It may be said that William's son John, of Coniston, became an avowed Roman Catholic for the sake of his third wife Dorothy Strickland of Sizergh; John's son William died young, and the hall went to his cousin William. William's son was the famous Sir Daniel (1633-1701) who finally deserted Coniston, leaving the house to his brothers Roger and William.

By the kindness of Mr. Gaythorpe there has been lent for exhibition (and since given to the Coniston Museum by Mr. A. H. Baldwin) an unpublished document concerning these later Flemings of Coniston Hall, of which the following is a copy:—

A true copy of the Award betweene M<sup>res</sup> eliz:<sup>th</sup> Kirkby of the one  
p<sup>ty</sup> & Roger fleming & Will<sup>m</sup> fleming Gentlemen on y<sup>e</sup> other  
p<sup>ty</sup>.

In pursuance of A Reference made vnto us s<sup>r</sup> Daniel fleming  
Knight & Richard Patrickson esq<sup>r</sup> by & betweene Eliz. Kirkby of  
Kirkby in Furness in y<sup>e</sup> county of †Lancaster spinster of the one

\* We have usually thought of Michael le Fleming I. (1127) as one of William Rufus' Flemish colonists; but the Rev. F. W. Ragg (these *Transactions*, N.S., ix., p. 270) seems to think it possible that the Flemings were earlier in Cumberland. Many details of this mediæval family have been collected by Mr. Brownbill for the *Victoria History of Lancashire*.

† "Cumb Cu" seems to have been written and crossed out, as though even then, and here, it was not always remembered that Furness is in Lancashire.

p<sup>ty</sup> & Roger ffleming, & Will<sup>m</sup> ffleming, both of Coniston-Hall in the s<sup>d</sup> County of Lancaster Gentlemen of the other p<sup>ty</sup>. Wee doe ord<sup>r</sup> & Award, that the said Roger ffleming, & Will<sup>m</sup> ffleming shall pay, or cause to be paid, vnto the said Eliz: Kirkby, vpon her sealeing, & deliuering, vnto them A generall release, of all claims & demands whatsoever, y<sup>e</sup> sum of thirty fve pounds of Lawfull English money, upon the twenty seauenth day of September \*next After the date hereof, att the house of Margaret Woodbourne of Uluerstone, in the County Aforesaid, Widdow; and that then after the payment of the said Money, the said Roger ffleming, & Will<sup>m</sup> ffleming, shall seale, & deliuer vnto the said Eliz: Kirkby, A gen<sup>rl</sup> Release, of all claimes, & demands whatsoever, provided, that if either of the said p<sup>tyes</sup>, who shall not aprobe, of this our Award, and shall pay tow guinees unto y<sup>e</sup> other, of said p<sup>tyes</sup>, within twenty eight dayes next after the date hereof, that then this our Award shall be void. In testymony whereof we haue herevnto sett our handes & seales the thirtieth day of Aprill An'oq: Domini, 1683.

Signed sealed & published  
in the p<sup>s</sup>ence of  
Lanclott Benson  
William Huddleston  
Robert Benson  
Christo: Birkett

Daniel ffleming O

Richard Patrickson O

The award is written on half a sheet of old foolscap paper, with no lettering in the watermark. It is called a copy, but seems more like a draft; for besides the corrections already noticed, in the heading the words "of the one p<sup>ty</sup>" after "M<sup>res</sup> eliz:<sup>th</sup> Kirkby" are interlined, and the writer began "Roger & Will<sup>m</sup> ffleming," and altered it to "Roger ffleming," &c. The signatures are in different hands.

Mistress Elizabeth Kirkby was the daughter of Colonel Richard (see Mr. H. S. Cowper on the family, these *Transactions*, N.S., vi., p. 97) and his second wife, Isabel Huddleston of Millom, whose married life lasted from about 1655 to about 1660. Elizabeth must have been about 23 when the award was made. Her great-uncle

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\* "Next" written at the end of the line, and again at the beginning of the following line; the first "next" crossed out.

John and great-aunt Alice, widow of William Fleming and mother of Daniel, Roger and William, had died at Coniston Hall about two years earlier, and the award may have related to a bequest to her. Sir William Huddleston of Millom was her grandfather, who recaptured the royal standard at Edgehill, and was made a knight banneret on the field. Richard Patrickson of Calder Abbey was her relation by marriage (his wife's brother, Miles Dodding, had married Elizabeth's aunt Margaret), so that he represented her in the award, as Sir Daniel represented his brothers. Lancelot and Robert Benson belonged to the great business clan of the district, and Christopher Birkett of Troutbeck was a well-known lawyer.

In the eighteenth century the hall was deserted and went to ruin. About 1794 Mrs. Radcliffe, who is known as the romantic author of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, visited Coniston and took the hall for a priory (Conishead)! She was much impressed with the thought of "the solemn vesper that once swelled along the lake from these consecrated walls, and awakened, perhaps, the enthusiasm of the voyager, while evening stole upon the scene." A charming picture, but quite out of drawing. So is the novel by Canon Gresley, entitled *Coniston Hall; or The Jacobites*. We know nothing of the place until about 1815, when it was partly patched up into a farmhouse.

The great barn, of which the foundation was laid on March 20th, 1688 (Sir Daniel Fleming's MS.), is that on the north; its west end was rebuilt a generation ago. The new barn to the south-west is more recent than the Ordnance map. The deer park extended to the high road on the west and to Hoathwaite Beck, the boundary of Torver, on the south. It contains pits which must have been fish ponds. The deer in the park are occasionally mentioned in the MSS. of Sir Daniel, who seems to have hunted them annually in September.